



Becoming Elizabeth Lawrence: Discovered Letters of a Southern Gardener

Emily Herring Wilson

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Ann Preston Bridgers, who first studied drama at Smith College and later lived in New York City to be close to Broadway, was the pride of Raleigh, North Carolina, where she founded the Little Theatre, a New Deal Federal Theatre project. In 1927, she coauthored with George Abbott *Coquette*, starring Helen Hayes. In 1929, *Coquette* became Mary Pickford's first talking movie. Ann, like George Abbott, was a great encourager of the young. Her talent for friendship and for identifying the talent of others led to her correspondence with Elizabeth Lawrence, who would become one of America's best garden writers.

Elizabeth, a graduate of Barnard College and the first female to graduate from the landscape design program at what is now North Carolina State University, was struggling to make a career for herself in Raleigh at a time when there was little work for landscape designers, especially women and especially in the South.

When Ann moved back to Raleigh in the early 1930s, she and Elizabeth struck up a friendship that continued after Elizabeth moved to Charlotte in 1948 and endured until Ann's death in 1967. They were two women of different generations (Ann was the older) who valued their opinions and their privacy and did not conform to images of the so-called Southern lady. Ann encouraged Elizabeth to find a way to live as she wished and guided her to write articles for some of the new women's magazines. Elizabeth was already making a splendid garden, and with Ann's help she began to write about her passion. By 1942, she was so successful that her book, *A Southern Garden*, was published. It is still considered a classic.

Although only a small number of Ann's letters were preserved, editor Emily Herring Wilson discovered a treasure trove of Elizabeth's letters to her mentor. Through those letters, readers can glimpse what life in a Southern town was like for women, especially during the 1930s and 1940s. Elizabeth discusses family, friends, books, plays, travels, ideas, and, of course, writing. In 2004, on what would have been her 100th birthday, Elizabeth (who died in 1984) was featured as one of the 25 greatest gardeners in the world by *Horticulture* magazine. That acclaim would never have come her way without her friendship with Ann Preston Bridgers.

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